

QUIT INDIA: A MOVEMENT OF MASS PARTICIPATION

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ABSTRACT

The Quit India movement saw the yearning of freedom flow through every Indian's blood, making it a massive movement of mass participation. The country was more determined than ever to "do or die" in the case of India's freedom. The movement ignited the spirit of freedom like never before and spread throughout the country like wild fire affecting each Indian heart.

Gandhiji gave his first public expression to the theory which was to crystallize into his 'Quit India' movement, in the article published on 26 the April, 1942, "Whatever the consequences, therefore to India, her real safety and Britain's too lie in orderly and timely British withdrawal from India." Once the idea was born, it gripped Gandhiji completely and he started devoting all this time to the elucidation and justification of his formula which soon became famous as the "Quit India" demand.

KEYWORDS: British Rule, Evacuation, Masses, Movement, Resolution, Struggle

INTRODUCTION

It is remarkable that although throughout the year 1942, an atmosphere of tense excitement prevailed in many parts of India, there was no communal disorder anywhere except on a very minor scale in isolated areas. Absence of trouble of this kind seems all the more striking in view of the fact that political hostility between Hindu and Muslim representative organizations had of late increased rather than diminished.

On the whole, the situation in the country in August 1942 was undoubtedly unprecedented and revolutionary, and in the absence of any clear cut programme and directions from the Congress High Command, the shape that popular upheaval took was but natural. But there is one redeeming and most remarkable feature of this spontaneous outburst which cannot remain unnoticed by a dispassionate observer. In the midst of the countrywide terrorism let loose by the most callous and alien government – mass arrests, firing on peaceful processions and demonstrations, looting and assaulting of innocent people and dishonouring of their womenfolk, collective fines and other illegal extortions, summary trials by special courts with sentences of imprisonment for long terms ranging upto 50 years and more, and transportation for life, public flogging and even death, with no right of appeal and the consequent bitterness and hatred in the people against British rule and even British people – there was practically no loss of British limb or life. This feature cannot but be ascribed to Gandhiji's exhortations on non-violence for the last 25 years specially his closing speech at the A.I.C.C. meeting on August 8, 1942.

The fact remains that the people faced great suffering and hardship, much greater than ever before but their efforts did not go in vain. A partial paralysis of our national activities was bound to come in the wake of large and ruthless repression and tyranny without any check or hindrance. But this was also a temporary phase. In spite of what had happened, the spirit of the people remained uncrushed. The yearning for freedom grew, discontent and bitterness against foreign administration increased.

The country was more determined than ever to “do or die” in the case of India’s freedom. Thus Quit India movement saw the yearning of freedom flow through every Indian’s blood, making it a massive movement of mass participation.

Gandhiji gave his first public expression to the theory which was to crystallize into his ‘Quit India’ movement, in the article published on 26 April, 1942 in the newspaper *Harijan*, “Whatever the consequences, therefore to India, her real safety and Britain’s too lie in orderly and timely British withdrawal from India.”¹ Once the idea was born, it gripped Gandhiji completely and he started devoting all this time to the elucidation and justification of his formula which soon became famous as the “Quit India” demand.

The anti-British feeling had become so pronounced in the country that it was beginning to be expressed in a pro-Japanese attitude. Gandhiji believed that voluntary British withdrawal would turn this hatred into goodwill and enable Indian leaders to arouse the people and organize resistance against the Japanese, help China and Russia more effectively and thus promote world peace. He wrote further : “I am convinced that the time has come during the war, not after it for the British and Indians be reconciled to complete separation from each other.”²

Gandhiji’s proposal for ‘an orderly withdrawal’ of the British raised strong doubts and provoked opposition even among some of his close colleagues and he patiently strove to win them. In order to explain the implication of ‘Quit India’ he filled the columns of *Harijan* in elaborating the programme and answering the questions raised. He dealt with problems like the Japanese invasion. There were two alternatives, either the withdrawal of the British would leave them, no excuse, to invade India. If however, instead of leaving India alone, they chose to subjugate her, then “they will find that they have to hold more than they can in their iron hoop.”³

To the question- to whom the British will entrust the administration of the country, Gandhiji’s answer was, “they have to leave India in God’s hands- but in the modern parlance to anarchy, and that anarchy may lead to internecine warfare for a time or to unrestrained dacoities. From those, a true India will rise in the place of the false one we see.” He further elaborated his theme saying that the existing state of India was no better than an “ordered disciplined anarchy.”⁴ Gandhiji had expounded his views on the situation and discussed his plan of action. He had come to know that the Government with its customary disregard of moral issues and its short-sighted predilection to sacrifice the future good and the permanent interest to what was needed immediately, had started preparations to crush any movement which the Congress might launch.

The congress working committee met and discussed for many days the situation, the malady and its cure. On July 14, the debate was over and two important resolutions were approved. The first resolution contained some guidelines to the people to meet the situation caused by large scale evacuation by the Government for what was needed. The second fateful resolution, dealing with the ‘national demand’ later formed the basis of the “Quit India” resolution it urged the British rulers of the necessity of making India free not in the interests of India but also for the safety of the world and for ending of

Nazism, Fascism, militarism and other forms of imperialism and the aggression of one nation over another.

The decision of the Congress working committee to launch a non-violent mass movement if the demand for British withdrawal is not met, invited different reactions. The Congress socialists, Forward blockists and other leftist elements, excluding the communists, welcomed the Congress stand and eagerly looked forward to the launching of the movement. But there were adverse and hostile reactions also. Many liberal leaders questioned the wisdom of launching the movement at this critical juncture. Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru had said much earlier that the time had come when the Mahatma in decency should retire from politics.⁵ Hriday Nath Kunzru, President of the Servants of India Society declared that the “launching of a mass civil disobedience movement would be detrimental to the best interests of the country.”⁶

After the Wardha meeting on 14th July, the Congress High Command issued instructions for large scale enrolment of volunteers and asked provincial and district committees to get prepared for the coming movement and in case Gandhi is arrested “the people would be free to adopt any method, violent or non-violent, to oppose the violence of the Government in very possible way. These instructions were secret and never made public.”⁷

According to an official report, almost all the speakers paid extraordinary attention to the student community and laid emphasis on the importance of each individual acting for him self. The Andhra Provincial Congress Committee, in one of its circulars to the District Congress Committee (29 July 1942) adumbrated a six stage programme⁸ apart from Gandhian protest, tactics like picketing, boycotting, non-co-operation, non-payment of revenues. It also advocated the cutting of telegraph and telephone wires but no action would be taken unless Gandhiji had given the call. But the organisational preparation had to be made.

The Government was determined in its resolve to take drastic action because it was alarmed by the writings of Gandhi, the resolution of the All India Congress Committee (April-May 1942) and the Wardha resolution of July 14. Its apprehensions were increased by the growing discontent among the people and the rising tide of doubt in Britain’s capability to defend India. It also realised that there was dissatisfaction in America and China against Britain’s attitude towards India.

So the Government did not want to let the grass grow under its feet. It would not allow any time to the movement to gain momentum. It was ready to strike at once, as heavy and crushing a blow as lay within its power unrestrained by any considerations of law, justice or morals, for a speedy defeat.

In an atmosphere electrified with forebodings of struggle conflict and call of self – dedication and sacrifice, the all India Congress Committee met at Bombay on August 7 1942. It took into consideration the motion of July 14, and adopted a long resolution which gave justification for asking the British to quit India and explained its implications. It formulated the lineaments of the constitution of the provisional Government, its composition and its aims, it pointed out the solution of the communal problem and declared India’s aspirations for world peace and amity.

The Committee placed Gandhi in command of the movement, but warned that a time might come when the Congress would be unable to issue instructions for people’s guidance. “when this happens every man and woman who is participating in this movement, must function for himself or herself within the four corners of general instructions issued.”⁹

On the day preceding the passing of the resolution, Gandhiji placed before the Working Committee a draft for instructions for the guidance for participation in the civil disobedience movement, the instructions were that on a fixed day

a Hartal (closure of business) would be observed together with a 24 hour fast and prayers, but no shopkeeper would be coerced to close his shop. The movement would be directed against the salt tax and in favour of illegal manufacture of salt and Land Tax would be refused. Those employed in Government offices, factories, railways, post offices etc. were not to join the movement till the occasion arose for their participation, But the members of the Legislatures and Municipalities and other public bodies should come out. All students above 16 years reading in Government institutions should leave these institutions but there should be no coercion in this matter.

On August 8, 1942 the Government issued an extraordinary Gazette Notification in order to justify its planned action against the Congress. The notification described the Congress as “a totalitarian organization”, and blamed its leaders for consistently impeding the growth of Indian nationhood.¹⁰ It was apparent that the government was about to follow a policy of repression and terror to liquidate the whole congress organization, if the existing laws were not adequate, new laws and ordinance or lawless laws were promulgated.

The first blow fell with the weight and suddenness of an avalanche. Gandhiji was arrested in the early morning on Sunday, August 9. Simultaneously all the members of the working Committee in Bombay were taken into custody and put in the old fort at Ahmednagar.

On August 9, immediately afterwards demonstrations, processions, and gathering of people took place first in Bombay, the venue of A.I.C.C. session. The crowds threw stones and soda water bottles at trains, buses and cars, and at the police. They burnt buses and attacked post offices. The police fired on sixteen occasions, killing eight persons and injuring forty-four. Similar incidents took place in Poona and Ahmedabad, in all these places mills and factories were closed and hartal observed.¹¹

On August 10, similar type of incidents occurred but in a more determined way. Telephone lines were cut; municipal and Government properties were damaged, barricades were put on the road. Europeans and Government official were molested. With the spread of revolt in Maharashtra and Gujarat on 11th August, disturbances took place in nearby areas like Kaira, Thana, Broach, Panch Mahals, Godhra, Surat, Ahmednagar, East Khandesh, Nasik, Satara, Belgaum, Dharwar, Ratnagiri, West Khandesh, Sholapur, Bijapur, Kanara and Kolaba. Whatever happened in Bombay on 9th and 10th was repeated at these places. On 12th August, at Chinchani, policemen were forced to join the procession. In Ahmedabad and Broach, mills had to be closed down as spinners refused to work. Attempts were made to attack the police station at Chaklashi (Kaira) and burn down the Government dispensary and post office at Chinchani (Thana). At Palghar, the Kacheri was attacked and at Rakata a police sub-inspector was assaulted. At these places, police had to fire to disperse the crowd. Attendance of students in schools and colleges at these places ranged between ten to thirty percent.¹²

On 15th August, attempts were made to set fire to the General post Office and Government Central Press in Bombay. The Cloth markets and Zaveri Bazars remained closed in Ahmedabad.

In Bihar, protests started in a serious form after August 11, after the attack on the Secretariat building. Within a week the trouble spread from district to district, taking the form of a rebellion. Furious mobs not only attacked Government buildings and offices and assaulted officials but also damaged railway tracks and railway stations, cutting Patna completely from the rest of India. Even lord Linlithgow reported the seriousness of revolt in Patna to Lord Amery: “Storm tempt appears to be Bihar where a serious situation has developed around Patna owing to widespread sabotage of railway lines and cutting of communication....” and he admitted that “Bihar situation is the most serious with which we have to deal.”¹³

Generally the people of Bihar handled their own indigenous weapons which included spears, bows arrows and other local products. After looting the police armoury they used rifles and guns. All classes of people took part in the movement- intellectuals, students, factory workers, miners, peasants, police defected in October, the jail population in Bihar rose to 27,000.¹⁴

In U.P. on 9th August, meetings and processions took place at Banaras, Allahabad, Mathura and Meerut. On 10th August, students attacked government buildings and Kanpur railway station was attacked and looted. On 11th August one hundred school boys were arrested in Etawah. Disturbances spread to Agra, Moradabad, Hapur, Lucknow, Meerut, Jaunpur, Mirzapur and Nainital. “Students continued to be the main spring of the movement in all places” cutting of communications and attacking Government buildings and property in different areas of the province. The situation took a serious turn at Banaras and Allahabad on 12th August. In the morning, the Allahabad kacheri was attacked and in the evening Kotwali. In eastern U.P. rural police stations, post offices were attacked Road communications were disrupted in the Balla Ghazipur area. The movement definitely spread from urban to rural areas now.

It was suspected that students from Banaras and agitators from Bihar were responsible for creating these troubles. The mob kept on clashing with the authorities at Mirzapur, Hardwar, Azamgarh, Madhubhan, Ghazipur and Ballia, Meerut and Muhammadabad. The Government lost control over the district of Ballia for ten days.¹⁵ In the Central Provinces, there was no serious disturbance till 19th August, 1942 apart from hartals, processions and meetings. But after 10th August, the situation worsened in the surrounding districts Wardha, Chanda, Bhandara and some parts of the Amaraoti district. In Nagpur, the crowd destroyed electric and telephone wires attacking police out posts and burning government property. Railway communications were widely disrupted.

In Madras, the trouble started from 11th August onwards. Telegraph and telephone lines were cut and railway stations were attacked and burnt down. Many trains were derailed. These disturbances started from Guntur and spread to West Godawri, Ramnad and Tanjore districts. Schools and colleges were closed. Mills were close in Coimbatore district. On 24th August, Sulur aerodrome was attacked and twenty two lorries and 3 drivers were burnt. Sabotage activities like felling trees across the roads, breaking culverts and cutting telegraph lines before they planned an attack continued in Anantpur, East Godawri, Nellore, Tanjore and Cuddapah districts. Schools, colleges and law courts were picketed. Even women took part in these demonstrations.

In Delhi, a hartal was observed on 9th August and disturbances spread out the following day. In Connaught place, the Lloyds Bank was attacked, some window panes were damaged and tram cars stoned. On 11th August, the police fired to disperse a violent procession at Chandni Chowk. After that many incidents of sabotage continued causing considerable damage to Government and municipal property. On August 12, the Calcutta-Kalka mail was derailed. The students picketed schools, colleges and courts Students of the Hindu and Ramjas Colleges were most active in sabotage activities.¹⁶

In Bengal, school students were prominent in organizing a hartal. On 9th August, partial hartal was observed in many places. At Calcutta, Dacca and many other places processions and meetings were held. After 13th August serious sabotage activates started aiming at damaging or interrupting communications and essential services. Tram cars were interrupted. Attacks were made on post offices and post vans, telephone and telegraph wires were cut, electric supply stations were smashed, electric sub station was put out of action.¹⁷

Outside Calcutta, there were attacks on post offices in Burdwan, Murshidabad, Dacca, Faridpur, Bakagang and Trippera districts and on Government buildings at Balurghat, Nanda, Hooghly, Rajshashi, Howrah and Noakhali.¹⁸

In Assam, the disturbances did not occur immediately. In the second half on August 1942, some incidents of sabotage took place in Nowgong district. Everywhere school and college students took active part in picketing processions and hartals. On 18th September the police fired upon a crowd at Berampur near Nowgong in which three persons were killed.

In Orissa also serious disturbances occurred though late, in the district of Balasore, Cuttack and Koraput. The mobs here damaged police stations, post offices, a road bridge and telegraph and telephone wires were cut in several places several P.W.D. Bungalows, post offices, canal revenue offices were burnt in the Kendrapara sub division. The police had to fire to disperse an armed crowd, in which one person was killed. In the Angul sub – division, a group of people attacked a police party, rescued the arrested Congress leaders and injured the Magistrate and some policemen.¹⁹ The tribal people took active part in damaging police stations, road bridges, telegraph wires and liquor shops in the Koraput district.

In Punjab, disturbances took place in Lahore, Amritsar, Ludhiana, Sargodha, Lyallpur, Multan, Gurgaon and Rawalpindi. Partial hartal was observed in some towns. Telephone wires were cut and minor damage done to a railway booking office. The quit India Movement was more intensive in Saurashtra, Ujjain, Gwalior, Kotah, Rajputana, Mysore, Baroda and Kashmir. A silk weaving factory was burnt in Mysore. The Bhadrawati steel works, the Kolar gold fields and the Hindustan Aircraft factory, Bangalore, were on strike for a long period, the Harihar railway line was completely dislocated. These activities considerably damaged the property of the Government of India in the princely states.²⁰

Ajmer Marwara did not have serious trouble during the movement. The government immediately issued orders against persons who were capable of creating trouble. The closure of schools and colleges in Ajmer and Beawar prevented serious disturbances. In Coorg, the movement was almost entirely confined to students, only the more extreme of the local Congress people took an open part in it, though a number of them undoubtedly were working in the background, encouraging and instructing students. They adopted similar line of action as in other parts of the country.

NWFP was the quietest spot in India during the disturbances. There was no concerted plan at initial stages only Abdul Gaffar Khan's efforts of picketing of liquor shops on 14th August at Peshawar and Bannu attracted the attention of people. There was lack of enthusiasm for their activities among public due to National Front and Muslim League's counteractions. Despite this, in some parts of the province i.e. Mardan and Bannu, Gaffar Khan intensified and guided this movement with great discipline.²¹ In Sindh, martial Law and few hundred arrests at the beginning of the movement kept this region quiet during the crisis. There were, of course, minor rioting and demonstrations by students.

The 1942 movement was indeed a movement of the youth. They took the arrest of the top Congress leaders as a challenge. The student community played a leading role and was, in fact the most troublesome element in cities. Different classes of people participated in the movement because of their sympathy with the Congress which commanded a wide measure of support in the province but the ferment among students seemed largely due to their romantic hero-worship of JawaharLal Nehru.²²

CONCLUSIONS

The Quit India Movement spread almost all over the country like wild fire. The call for 'Do or Die' reached every home and heart. All the sections of the Indian community were aroused to action- teachers, lawyers, students, farmers, labourers, women and in some cases even the Government servants openly defiled the authorities to such extent, that at some places, the official machinery came to a grinding halt. The movement generated a spirit of sacrifice, for getting their freedom among the masses. People staked their lives at the call to drive out the British from India.

It has been rightly said by some scholars that Gandhiji brought nationalism to the masses and it was completed by the movement of 1942. The success of the Quit India Movement is to be seen in the awakening of the masses. They were inspired to the point of no return. It is in this unsurmountable spirit for liberty and the desire to attain freedom that its real significance is to be determined.

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